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No. 55

AIRMAIL

RECEIVED AMERICAN CONSULATE
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

1940 FEB 15 PM 3 08 Antofagasta, Chile February 10, 1940

DIVISION OF
COMMUNICATIONS
AND RECORDS



SUBJECT: Erben, Dr. Hermann Frederick

1-1035

THE HONORABLE

THE SECRETARY OF STATE,

WASHINGTON.

SIR:

I have the honor to refer to this Consulate's
despatch No. 52 of January 26, 1940 entitled "Erben,
Dr. Hermann Frederick" and to report further to the
Department regarding the person who is the subject of
this despatch.

On January 26 ultimo the American SS NIGHTINGALE
called at this port and the master reported that he
needed a messman for the crew and requested this
Consulate to provide one if any was available. Dr.
Erben was then in this port as a passenger from Val-
paraiso to Callao on the Japanese MS HEIYO MARU, and
since he had requested this Consulate's assistance in
signing on an American vessel, stating that he would
do anything, for the purpose of returning to the
United States, he was told about the vacancy in the
NIGHTINGALE's crew and he promptly requested to be
signed on the vessel to fill the vacancy. The master

of

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130- ERBEN, H.

NM

The NIGHTINGALE called at this port northbound on February 7th and Dr. Erben called at this Consulate to ask the undersigned to persuade Captain Parker to discharge him from the vessel when it reached the Panama Canal, stating that when he left the German vessel USUKAMA at Buenos Aires, in which he claimed to have been serving as a ship's surgeon, he had been permitted only to bring the khaki uniform he was wearing* and that with only this clothing he could not brave the rigor of winter in New York. He thought if he could be discharged from the NIGHTINGALE at the Panama Canal he would be able to support himself with the wages he had earned (some \$25.00) until he could catch a vessel bound for California where the climate would be milder, and where he had friends who would help him. When asked who the friends were he mentioned the names of Errol Flynn, the actor, and Ernest Hemingway, the author, with whom he had gone to Spain to fight in the recent civil war in that country. Dr. Erben was informed that the Consulate had no authority to induce Captain Parker or the Canal Zone authorities to let him sign off there. He returned to the vessel and sailed north in it when it departed from this port on February 8th.

* It was observed, however, that he managed to save a very good camera.

034607031 Captain

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Captain Parker also called at the Consulate on February 8th to report that he had become very suspicious of the man (Dr. Erben) which he had signed on here while southbound. He reported that upon reaching Valparaiso Dr. Erben was met by a large delegation from the members of the crew of the German sailing ship PRIEWALD, which is taking refuge there, and that the impression he gained was that Dr. Erben was a man of considerable importance to them judging by the deference they showed him and the number of Nazi salutes given to him. While in Valparaiso Dr. Erben, when not doing his job on the NIGHTINGALE, spent all of his time aboard the German vessel or photographing anything he could train his camera on. Captain Parker said he obtained a boat and went around the Chilean battleship LATORRE photographing it from stem to stern. When the NIGHTINGALE called at Coquimbo northbound Dr. Erben was again met by a large delegation of Germans, and Captain Parker gained the impression that he was well known and appeared to be a man of importance to most members of the delegation. At this port Dr. Erben busily photographed everything in sight including the American vessel in which he was serving. Captain Parker's suspicion of Dr. Erben increased and, since he knew he was coming to Antofagasta to ship a cargo of 4,800 tons of copper which will probably eventually find its way to the allies in the European war, he gave orders to the ship's officers to keep a sharp watch over Dr. Erben and not permit him access to certain

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parts of the ship. Afterward, the Chief Engineer reported that Erben attempted to gain access with his camera to the engine room. This was not permitted because the NIGHTINGALE is one of the new Maritime Commission freighters said to have some new developments in the engine room. Strict orders were imparted to keep Erben out of the engine room.

Captain Parker said that Erben had taken up with him the question of his discharge at the Canal Zone, and had been told that since the vessel would not make formal entry there but only stop to bunker, the appropriate officials would not be on hand to effect his discharge and that it could not be done.

However, Captain Parker stated to the undersigned that the discharge could be effected while his vessel was bunkering provided it should be agreeable to the authorities, and requested this Consulate to communicate with the authorities of the Canal Zone and request them to inform him upon his arrival there if the man may be discharged. Captain Parker feels sure that Erben is a German agent, despite his status as a naturalized American, and he wishes to proceed accordingly. Therefore, he wishes advance notice from the Canal Zone authorities so if they refuse to allow Erben's discharge there he can take action which would not tend to arouse Erben's suspicion that he is suspected of being the agent of a foreign power attempting to gain access to the Canal. No communication has been sent to any authorities of the Canal but a copy of this despatch has been sent to our

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Embassy at Panama for any action deemed by it to be appropriate.

In addition to Captain Parker's report that Erben photographed everything around the port works at Antofagasta including the copper loading operations on the NIGHTINGALE, the undersigned observed certain activity on his part which was interesting. During the afternoon of February 7th at about 3:00 o'clock Dr. Erben was seen entering the German bank together with the leader of the German Nazi party here, who is a German national. Had Dr. Erben wished to obtain exchange of money it seems likely that he would have effected the transaction in the street where a more favorable rate could be had. In any case it does not seem necessary that he should have been accompanied by the Nazi leader in order to effect a simple exchange operation. The deduction drawn is that he was either receiving money from the bank or using it as a means of transmitting and receiving messages.

During the conversations had with Dr. Erben certain interesting information was received, but it must be taken into account that it was all the result of his own statements. His mother, Johana Erben, resides in Vienna at III Arenbergring 19, and he has two sons in the German army now on active duty after serving in the Polish campaign. Just before the Munich crisis he was visiting his mother, and he received instructions to report to army headquarters. He did and he was given a rank in the medical corps,

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outfitted with a uniform and accoutrements, and told if war should break out he was to report at a certain hospital bringing 5-day's rations. He said that he protested on the ground that he was an American citizen, but he was told "you were born a German, you are of German race, you are a German, and you always will be a German". Dr. Erben admitted participation in the Spanish civil war and the present conflict in China. He reported that the only way he could get out of Germany was to place himself under the orders of the German Admiralty and ship as surgeon on a German ship. He stated that when he reached Buenos Aires on a German ship, presumably the USUKAMA, after the outbreak of war, and learned that it had become unlawful for American citizens to serve in belligerent vessels he left the vessel voluntarily. However, he was considered by German officials at Buenos Aires to be on active duty and was told to prepare to be returned to Germany for further service. He then received orders to report to the German TACOMA but he never did this because the vessel became embroiled in the GRAF SPEE affair and was interned in Uruguay. He reported that he then asked the German officials at Buenos Aires (not stating whether of the German Embassy or others) for permission to return to Germany by his own means. His petition was granted so he said because "I am on active duty with the German Admiralty and it realized that I would have a better chance of returning to Germany and resuming service that way than if I went to sea from Buenos Aires on

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a German vessel which would almost certainly be sunk". He said that he adopted this procedure to get away from the Germans and reach the United States. His subsequent conduct along the west coast of South America does not bear out his desire to liberate himself from contact with Germans, but he claims that he must continue "to put on an act to obviate reprisals against those I love who are residing in Germany". When he reached Valparaiso Dr. Erben reports that he received orders to report to a German vessel in Talcahuano and put to sea when it did. He claimed that he disregarded these orders and embarked as a passenger on the Japanese HEIYO MARU in an attempt to return to the United States. If he fears reprisals against relatives in Germany it appears that disregarding orders will be an excellent way to bring them about. Dr. Erben is not, of course, telling his whole story. The fact that Dr. Erben is on the British list of suspected German agents, as reported by the British Consul here, is also significant.

Respectfully yours,

George H. Adams
George H. Adams
American Vice Consul

820.02 (In triplicate to Department: original direct by airmail; two copies by airmail pouch from Santiago, Chile)

GHA:rc (Copies to: American Embassy, Santiago, Chile
Consulate General, Santiago, Chile
American Embassy, Panama, Panama).

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February 20, 1940.

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CONFIDENTIALMEMORANDUM FOR CAPTAIN NIXON

As of possible interest to the Office of Naval Intelligence-- there is attached a copy of air mail despatch no. 55 of February 10, 1940 sent to the Department of State by the American Consulate at Antofagasta, Chile, in the case of Dr. Hermann Frederick Erben.

A copy of this despatch is also being sent to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

copy
A-B:FWARREN:BM:SS

03 JUN 1940
A true copy of the signed original.
[Signature]